

Harper had spent several hours talking with Silverton business owners who were dependent on train passengers for tourist dollars. They urged him to keep the train running. In addition, business owners from hotels and restaurants to jeep tour companies, fly fishing outfitters, and others in Durango also attempted to persuade him to keep the trains running. Yet, many residents who had no apparent interest in tourism and local officials urged him to close operations.

Earlier in the day, Harper and senior vice president Jeff Jackson rode a pop car (a small two-person rail vehicle) behind the morning train to Silverton to observe first-hand the railroad's expanded fire prevention measures. On that trip, Harper had seen four small fires that were ignited by smokestack cinders and personally stomped one out himself. By noon, the mountain valley close to the railroad's main line between Durango and Silverton was filled with smoke from the advancing Missionary Ridge fire (Schober, 2002). Harper, who had flown in from his office in Florida when the fire started, returned to his hotel room and weighed his options.

He knew he had to make a decision and announce it soon. Should he listen to local businesses, stay fully staffed and keep the trains running? Should he listen to concerned citizens and fire fighting officials and temporarily cease all operations and lay off employees? Should he limit service to only the Thomas the Tank runs that stayed close to Durango in open areas away from the forests? If he did decide to suspend operations, how should he deal with customers who had already made reservations and planned their vacation travels around a ride on the D&SNG? Could local, state, or federal officials pre-empt his decision and order a shutdown for safety reasons?

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## ANY CITY CAN BE A TOURIST DESTINATION

ROY A. COOK AND BARBARA H. NEMCEK

### INTRODUCTION

Tourists are naturally attracted to destinations that are easy to access, are blessed with natural beauty, have well developed entertainment offerings, or offer consistently mild climates. What do you do if you are in a location that is devoid of all of these obvious attractors?

That was the question faced by decision-makers in Wichita Falls, Texas. When the city leaders first embarked on their attempts to lure tourists to this secondary Texas city there was a great deal of skepticism, "...because of the area's perception as a sleepy, remote city with few amenities and scorching summers." (*City of Wichita Falls, Vision 20/20 Plan*, July 2008, p. 33) Wichita Falls was not known for its location, beauty, noteworthy attractions, dining, or recreation opportunities.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Wichita Falls is a secondary city with a population of a little over 100,000 located in the Panhandle Plains of Texas. It is the focus of commerce in the region as it serves as the county seat and home for many governmental offices for Wichita County. In addition to governmental services, the city is an agricultural trading center and home to many independent oil and gas operations and Sheppard Air Force base, the training center for NATO pilots. Aside from these traffic drivers, there is little else that serves as natural attractions as the city sits in the nondescript high Texas plains, about 130 miles west of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, 225 miles southeast of Amarillo, Texas; and 140 miles south of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

## FROM ECONOMIC POWERHOUSE TO MEDIOCRITY

The early days were filled with excitement and economic vitality. As Wichita Falls entered the 20th century, it was the crossroads for six railroads, setting itself up as a transportation and supply center for a large geographic area serving Northwestern Texas and Southeastern Oklahoma. If the railroads didn't create enough excitement for this High Plains Texas city, the discovery of oil in the early 1900s ushered in another gusher of economic activity. Oil companies and the related activities surrounding a boom town atmosphere created a thriving and vibrant city.

However, it seems like all good things must come to an end, and it finally did in the 1960s. As oil production declined in importance, wildcatters and producers switched their attention to other areas. So, the city switched its economic focus and looked to industry for new growth. Enter a new organization, the Industrial Development, Inc. (the precursor to the present-day Board of Commerce and Industry).

Things again looked promising as new businesses were successfully recruited bringing in new or expanded manufacturing facilities and employment opportunities. Once again, the future looked bright. But, just like in the past, these new economic activities began to evaporate. By the 1980s, manufacturing plant closures combined with a severe decline in oil prices came as a double economic whammy. It must have seemed to many residents that every time things started to look up that the future soon looked gloomy.

In the face of these setbacks, city leaders were not deterred. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Wichita Falls continued to seek economic diversification. Although these efforts resulted in some growth of the manufacturing sector, the economy remained relatively dependent on both the oil sector and government. The city began hosting more and more events, but it didn't seem as though anyone was thinking about tourism as being an economic engine.

The economic picture continued to deteriorate as the gravitational pull and regional transportation linkages with both the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex and Oklahoma City continued to increase in importance. In the shadow of these two giants it seemed like Wichita Falls' prominence as a regional trade center were destined to continue fading.

To compete successfully in this changing environment, Wichita Falls was forced to carve out a niche for itself and capitalize on the amenities and assets it could offer that other cities in the region could not. Part of this future was now dependent on recognizing and developing tourism products that would showcase the city and draw in visitors (*City of Wichita Falls, Vision 20/20 Plan*, July 2008).

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Wichita Falls elected a new mayor in 2005. He promised that the city would put into action some type of plan that would revitalize the city. With the downsizing of the largest employer in Wichita Falls, Sheppard Air Force Base, the area economy had taken a major downturn. There was considerable disagreement among the various stakeholder groups of the City—City Council, Economic Development Offices, Chamber of Commerce, and Downtown Council—on how they should proceed to revitalize the economy of Wichita Falls. The new mayor held numerous "Town Hall Meetings" with all the stakeholder groups. He hired a new City Manager, and a consultant to work on City Planning and Priorities. He established an Office of Economic Adjustment to assist the city in dealing with the Air Force base downsizing and resultant loss of jobs and dollars flowing into the economy.

After much study, discussion, and debate, the major stakeholders came together and developed a strategic plan, "Wichita Falls—Vision 20/20, City of Wichita Falls," in July 2008. The vision statement: "A Vibrant Regional Center, Attractive to Talent and Investment" had three goals:

1. Develop, retain, attract, and engage talent,
2. Diversify and grow the economic base, and
3. Promote and enhance Wichita Falls' quality of place.

The Plan focused on development of four key areas and was supported with specific strategies. The key areas of focus were the downtown (central business district), attracting talent, business development, and image and marketing. First, the downtown area was badly in need of revitalization. Changes in commercial development patterns in conjunction with a weakening of the city's oil sector had resulted in decline and decay of a once thriving downtown commercial center. Second, attracting and nurturing talent was perhaps the most fundamental issue facing the city in its efforts to create a long-term sustainable economic vitality. Third, the assessment of industry considered the full complement of economic activities, ranging from traditional industrial employers to services, as well as the physical infrastructure and the business climate to support those activities. Opportunities for expansion of existing companies, the potential of entrepreneurship, and the importance of the service sector were recognized as building blocks for sustainability and growth. Finally, there was a need to improve the community's image—both internally and externally. It was difficult to draw people to Wichita Falls, but it was soon recognized that if they liked it when they visited, they would come again or even relocate.

Table 1 shows the strategies that were designed to support each of the key areas of concern.

**Table 1: Strategies Developed to Support Plans for Development and Growth**

Strategies developed to revitalize the downtown area

1. Formalize tools for promoting revitalization.
2. Support the establishment of "anchors."
3. Use residential development as a primary catalyst.
4. Develop a retail strategy emphasizing "destination" retail.
5. Target professional services, company headquarters, and entrepreneurship to alleviate the surplus of office space downtown and surplus of office workers in Wichita Falls.

Strategies developed to attract talent

1. Re-establish ties to former residents.
2. Initiate and maintain a Sheppard Air Force Base veterans' inventory.
3. Continue supporting educational excellence.
4. Align economic development and education programs—K-12, vocational, 2-yr, 4-yr.
5. Develop new generations of leaders.
6. Continue efforts of Workforce Development Task Force.

Strategies developed to support business development

1. Expand healthcare cluster.
2. Enhance professional services cluster.
3. Continue the development of industry clusters in the region.
4. Continue business retention and expansion activities.
5. Promote entrepreneurship in the region.
6. Foster regionalism.
7. Continue to pursue new missions for Sheppard Air Force Base.
8. Encourage growth in the tourism sector.

Strategies developed to support image and marketing

1. Commission a community-wide marketing and image plan.
2. Designate an individual to manage the city-wide marketing campaign.
3. Initiate a local positive image campaign.
4. Continue to build awareness of the region among decision-makers in target industries and site selectors.
5. Maximize the impression of Wichita Falls to visitors.
6. Continue city-wide beautification initiatives.

All of these activities resulted in the completion of the "Vision 20/20 Plan" in July 2008—naming Wichita Falls "The Gateway to Texas."

## TAKING INVENTORY AND LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR INCREASED TOURISM TRAFFIC

Although there is little in the way of natural beauty or urban amenities to attract visitors, the city had a number of features that could be developed as attractors:

- The city's downtown baroque architecture (built during the 1930's oil boom) could be revived and utilized,
- The people of the city, with training and confidence in what there is to see and do, could serve as ambassadors,
- There is a lake, hiking trails, a wildlife refuge and parks (all still needed further development), and
- There are many events and gatherings.

Of particular importance to tourism development was the large number of events held throughout the year as shown in Table 2.

Wichita Falls is also home to Midwestern State University, which hosts a number of cultural and athletic events, and the city also hosts the WildCats, a National Hockey League minor league team. In addition, visitors will find a water park, including a Wichita Falls Water Falls (built with Niagara Falls rock), and a variety of museums and historic buildings. While in Wichita Falls, visitors can choose from 26 lodging properties with a total of 2,200 rooms. Wichita Falls is mainly a drive market, but the city has minimal and improving air service.

Faced with location and amenity challenges, key tourism stakeholders set about to participate in repositioning the city as a tourism destination. Because tourism is a conglomeration of many industries and needs the coordination of a wide variety of enterprises and agencies are needed, planning was never easy.

The first order of business was to hire a director for the project, and then work with the stakeholder groups, each of which had their own marketing plan, to develop an "Overarching Brand" for Wichita Falls. All groups agreed to work together on one primary project—this included the Board of Commercialization and Industry (Chamber including the Economic Development Corporation), the Downtown Wichita Falls Association, and the City of Wichita Falls. To support these efforts a fundraising campaign was launched and gathered \$1,500,000 with \$500,000 allocated to fund projects and programs in each of the first three years.

The meetings, discussions and the development of a plan took over a year and involved input from over 2000 people in the community. They spent a great deal of time defining "who" Wichita Falls was, and "what" they wanted to be. The end result was a logo, a brand, and a marketing plan for the community. This campaign was called "Pride in the Falls"—Blue Skies—Green Spaces—Golden Opportunities. Planning began in 2009 and the new campaign was rolled out in 2010. Many of the first campaign items touted: "Best of \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank)." Or, slogans like, "Quirky, interesting people and places—only a couple of hours from \_\_\_\_\_" (you fill in the blank). Another idea that gathered a lot of attention among residents

**Table 2** Yearly Events

Red River Wine Festival	Rodeo
Western Swing Music Festival	Ballet Theater
Texas-Oklahoma Oil Bowl	Downtown Strolls
Texas Ranch Roundup and Festival	Wichita Falls Symphony
Hotter 'N Hell Hundred Bike Race	Kemp Center for the Arts
Downtown City Lights Festival	Cajun Fest
Midwest State Univ.—Burns Lights Display	Cinco de Mayo Celebration
St. Patrick's Day Celebration	Texoma Golf Tournament
Zombie Crawl	Falls Fest
Red Dirt Fest	Tornado Alley Racquetball Tournament

was the T-Shirt Campaign. These tee-shirts sported slogans such as, "We're Not in Kansas—Never Were: Wichita Falls, TX," "Red Draw—Not an Art Project: Wichita Falls, TX," and "It's OK to have a cow: Wichita Falls, TX."

A key component of the initial campaign was to focus on general marketing communications—to tell the story to its own citizens first, selling them on the excitement of Wichita Falls. Sixty percent of the funding for the first campaign was directed internally, while 40% was directed externally to tell the story outside the community and draw people to Wichita Falls. This portion of the campaign was directed particularly toward Texas and southern Oklahoma. Ads were placed on buses, in magazines and in brochures.

Wichita Falls flags were sold to local residents and businesses. A publicity campaign was launched promoting the fact that the city had been named the "6th Best Value of Living" in the U.S. Literature was placed in the hotels and restaurants. The overall tagline was "Blue Skies—Golden Opportunities," and the Chamber promoted "Hard working—Easy Living" featuring well known local leaders, the CVB promoted "Find Yourself in the Falls," and the Downtown Association promoted "Downtown Proud." The campaign was designed to build a "fulfilling sense of community"—potential financial opportunities and entrepreneurial possibilities comparable to bigger cities for newcomers, and a sense of community in the welcoming fellowship for temporary residents—military-based personnel and academics. An ad campaign was launched: "Troops First—First in our Hearts, First in Line" which gained national attention and awards.

There were Public Relations Placements and Signature Events, all with organized and coordinated marketing pieces. An initial area of concentration was to bring back, revitalize and grow the older events the city had been known for like the Oil Bowl and the Ranch Round-up. This was followed by the development of some new events particularly concentrating on downtown development and regional sports activities. "Because of a general lack of awareness of events, activities and attractions, a portal site with a common community calendar was developed. For the first time, one, easy-to-use calendar generated from a variety of organizations and sites existed for the citizens of Wichita Falls." (*The Visual Brand, Wichita Falls, Texas, 2011, Texas, p. 8*). Overall the promotional messages concentrated on (1) Quality of Life in Wichita Falls, (2) Tourism and Events, and (3) the Image of Wichita Falls.

## CONTINUING THE CAMPAIGN

During the second year of the campaign (2011), the promotions became less generic and more specific. The ads touted the importance of the city and Sheppard Air Force Base. One of the television ads: "Troops First" gained national attention, and won an award for excellence. Another series of ads were addressed to "Fly Wichita Falls" when jet service was added to the local airport. Air traffic increased solidly with this campaign. Pride Promotions included some Texas stars in the campaign—Willie Nelson, etc. The number of sunny days in Wichita Falls was touted, its importance as an Air Force training center was highlighted, and the "golden opportunities for business" were showcased. The campaign's promotional concentrations were reversed for this stage of the campaign with 40% of the message being directed internally and 60% directed externally.

Throughout the campaign, the "Theme and Logo" were developed and utilized in:

- Advertisements—print in newspapers and magazines across the state, and on highways north, south and west,
- Media—either event advertising or personal testimonials on quality of life of Wichita Falls residents,
- Brochures and all collateral materials,
- Buses, utility box covers, etc.,
- Signage throughout community, and
- Events.

The new brand depicted a partial drawing of the northern Texas border, with a star placed where Wichita Falls is located. The "Blue Skies—Golden Opportunities" tagline was used throughout.

Other promotional activities were directed at building differentiators for the city into advertising and promotions. One targeted message was designed to help the city become known as the “Extreme Sports Capital of Texas.” Other examples of these efforts include hosting the:

- Oil Bowl (High School Football “All Star” game between Texas and Oklahoma),
- Hotter ‘N’ Hell Hundred (100 mile bike race over 100 degrees—25,000 attendance), and
- Zombie Crawl (downtown evening stroll) and a Zombie 5K.

In the latest phase of the campaign, the emphasis has been on setting up focused events. Each of these events has an underlying theme, “Extreme Wichita Falls Events.” To reinforce this theme, there is a certification and stamp given out by the city to event organizers and planners. If the event has something unusual or distinctive, it can get the “stamp” of “Extreme Wichita Falls” which can then be used in their promotional literature. For example, landing a new semi-professional football team—the “Wichita Falls Nighthawks” is a perfect example of what city planner are trying to accomplish with this new theme. In Texas, where football reigns supreme, this type of event can become a major draw. The celebrity guest for the family event “kick off” was legendary quarterback and family-values spokesperson, Tim Tebo, so the organizers sought out and were granted the City stamp: “Extreme Wichita Falls.”

## THE RESULTS

With a great deal of focus on bringing tourists to the city and hard work, the skeptics were proved wrong and Wichita Falls saw an increase in tourism traffic. With a great deal of focus on bringing tourists to the city and hard work the skeptics who thought, “Why would anyone come to Wichita Falls?” were proved wrong and the city saw an increase in tourism traffic.

One simple metric that can measure this increase was the change in lodging tax receipts. These receipts increased from \$1,429,656 in 2009 to \$1,564,204 in 2011. This is an over 9% increase during extremely difficult economic times. In addition, there are many other tangible and intangible benefits that can be cited to demonstrate the success of the campaign.

Since launching the “Pride in the Falls” campaign, the city has experienced an increase in tourist visits. Some of the initial results of the campaign include:

- Four percent of citizens surveyed said they noticed an increase in community pride,
- Texas Governor Rick Perry made a special trip to Wichita Falls to recognize the campaign,
- Seven regional and state-wide awards have been received for the campaign,
- Positive press in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Texas Monthly*, *Bike Magazine*, *American Cowboy Magazine*, *Outside*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, plus many more, and
- This was just the beginning.

## WHAT WE CAN LEARN

As the Mayor and the people directly involved in the “Pride in the Falls” campaign regularly state, “This campaign was designed to build brand awareness exclusive of job creation.” The aim of the campaign was to build a “favorable environment” for positive developments in the community. Therefore, comprehensive tracking through the tourism industry was not done. But, the taskforce believed the campaign had a very positive effect on the community and its development. Since launching the “Pride in the Fall” campaign, the city has experienced an increase in tourist visits, and number of events and attendance at these events has been up overall.

There is general consensus that the “Pride in the Falls” campaign has had a positive effect and should be continued. Everyone was pleased with the effect the campaign had upon all the community constituent groups and how they learned to work together for increased effectiveness in all their organizations. The citizens of Wichita Falls demonstrated that any city, no matter what the obstacles, can be a destination. What can be learned from their experiences and applied to other city’s seeking to attract the export income of tourism?

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## RESORTS GO UP ... AND DOWN

ANDREW NEMETHY

Destruction is usually associated with unexpected natural disasters. But, according to futurist August St. John, "destruction" is perfectly natural—indeed, inevitable—for resort and tourist towns.

St. John is a professor of marketing and future studies at Long Island University in New York. He has developed a comprehensive theory on the life and death of tourist towns, which he says go through a cycle of five stages: Welcome, Development, Resentment, Confrontation, and, finally, Destruction.

It's the last stage, not surprisingly, that has raised eyebrows. By "destruction," St. John doesn't mean a physical catastrophe, but the ruin or disappearance, as growth overwhelms a resort area, of the things that were the original attractions: neighborliness and sense of community, a rural landscape, small-town atmosphere, friendliness, low traffic and low taxes.

As this occurs, he says, communities break into hostile camps over development. Growth moratoriums, lawsuits and contentious hearings often ensue. Many residents find they can no longer afford to live and shop in their town. Faced with constant irritants to remind them of their situation—traffic jams, soaring rents—locals wear resentment on their sleeves.

And on their bumpers. In the resort community of Manchester, Vermont, where St. John has had a home since 1962, cars sport stickers saying, "Welcome to Manchester. Now Go Home."

This is obviously no way for a resort to greet tourists, but St. John says Manchester is in the destruction stage and this kind of animosity is typical. Not surprisingly, local powers-that-be vehemently disagree. They call him names, such as "Professor Gloom-and-Doom." St. John has been branded everything from pro-development to anti-development, and accused of having a "hidden agenda" by the president of nearby Bromley and Magic Mountain ski areas.

He takes it all in stride, insisting he isn't taking sides, just telling it like it is.

"Everything has patterns," St. John says. "Everything changes if you wait long enough. If something is hot you wait long enough, it's cold. That's all I'm saying. It's not better or worse. It's just different."

Though his tourism cycle is based on five years of studying Manchester, he says it applies to resort communities everywhere. Manchester has been an ideal guinea pig, St. John says, because it has virtually every facet of a tourism-based economy. The town has a business sector dependent on tourists, imported workers who service the resort trade, old-wealth summer residents, affluent newcomers, developers, assorted professionals, and long-time natives.

It has a historic, 150-year-old resort village dominated by the sprawling, restored Equinox Hotel. It's also home to a booming commercial center with the upscale fishing and clothing company Orvis, all manner of outlet stores and boutiques, and grand development schemes.

And three ski resorts are nearby—Stratton, Bromley and Magic Mountain.

Most of the flak St. John faces comes from his use of the word "destruction," but he says this stage isn't all negative. It can also be "creative" and a "rebirth," once a community realizes its original draw has disappeared and "something else has to be put in its place." But if negative attitudes toward tourists do not change and conflicts remain, "there's no guarantee once you hit bottom that you can come back."

St. John, 62, a tanned, animated man with a neat salt-and-pepper moustache and a vague resemblance to Sean Connery, is an unlikely lightning rod. He has spent most of his career teaching or consulting quietly behind the scenes, using his background in economics, sociology, psychology and marketing.

Cycles fascinate St. John, much as statistics thrill a baseball fanatic. He points out that as far back as 500 B.C., his favorite Greek philosopher, Heraclitus "The Obscure," said everything is always in "flux," and that "one cannot step twice into the same river."

Tourism communities must realize their business is in a state of flux and not immune to cycles, says St. John. Sitting underneath the dark, exposed beams of an old, restored carriage barn that is his home, he predicts many changes for ski and resort areas:

- "There are only going to be two types of ski resort: The very expensive and the very cheap." Ski resorts in the middle face difficulty and some will go bankrupt.
- "People today want their money's worth." Ski areas have to deliver value to survive, whether it's a decent hamburger or coupons that give a discount at local restaurants.
- Fancy resorts that cater to the cream of the market have to "savor the customer" and concentrate less on capital investment and more on service. "They've got the apple: They better start shining it."

He points out that 20 years ago no one ever imagined going to a ski resort and "never putting on skis." But a long list of activities and amenities now provide plenty of diversions to attract nonskiers.

"The concept is wider. It's not just skiing," he says.

Some communities fail to recognize that as growth occurs, the local economy becomes driven less by tourism than by development and a phalanx of architects, lawyers, planners, contractors and engineers. When development runs out of steam, the community is forced to confront how to maintain its economy.

While he insists that going from the "welcome" to "destruction" stage is inevitable, St. John says active planning can prolong and control the progression by helping preserve a resort town's appeal and character.

"It's like the difference between two people. One of them stays fit and takes care of himself, the other drinks and gets dissipated," he says.

St. John has developed a way to rate local attitudes so communities can find out where they fit in his five-stage cycle (see accompanying box). Using the information, a community can look ahead and plan.

"The future of the future," he says, sounding like a modern-day Heraclitus, "is in the present."

*A freelance writer/author living in the hills near Montpelier, Vermont, Andrew Nemethy has witnessed 20 years of changes in Green Mountain resort towns.*